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SUBJECT: A/S WELCH, MINDEF TANTAWI DISCUSS GOE ACTION ON
GAZA BORDER, U.S. PEACE STRATEGY AND ASSISTANCE

Classified By: DCM Stuart Jones for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (S) Summary. In a March 6 meeting, A/S Welch encouraged Mindef Tantawi to work with the U.S. and Israel to achieve calm in Gaza, help restart Israeli-PA negotiations, and to improve the quality of life for the Palestinian people on the. [is no rocket fire into Israel, the GOI would have no reason to continue military operations in Gaza. Mindef Tantawi said that the GOE is "doing its best" to secure the Philadelphia corridor, and it is currently difficult for Hamas to smuggle weapons through the border. The Minister said that Egypt is ready to procure U.S.-supplied border detection equipment, and is building a border wall. He explained the GOE decision not to use force against Palestinian civilians at Rafah, which A/S Welch welcomed, and thanked A/S Welch for the USG's recent waiver of the assistance conditions. End summary.

U.S. Goals and Egypt's Role

2. (S) A/S Welch briefed the Minister on Secretary Rice's March 4-5 visit to Israel and the West Bank, and described U.S. goals as follows: General Fraser will convene a U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian trilateral meeting soon to focus on Roadmap obligations. Israel has two goals: to stop rocket fire from Gaza, and to prevent Hamas from building up its military capacity, as Hizballah has done in Lebanon. Egypt has an opportunity to improve its bilateral relations with Israel. Egypt and Israel have a shared problem: Hamas.

3. (S) In response to the Minister's question, A/S Welch outlined Israeli Mindef Barak's thinking; he sees 3 options: 1) attack and reoccupy Gaza; 2) invade Gaza, pull-out and then invite a foreign supervisory force into Gaza; or 3) continue Israel's current military strategy of responding to rocket fire and then suspending operations. The U.S. does not believe that any of these options are practical. Therefore, if the Philadelphia corridor is secured, if there is no smuggling into Gaza and no rocket fire into Israel, then there will be no reason for Israeli military operations to continue. Egypt can play a helpful role here, especially on the smuggling. If the Philadelphia corridor is secure, then the Israelis will look differently at the other crossings. A/S Welch said he had told Congress and the Israelis that the Egyptians are committed to securing the border.

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Egyptian Action on the Border and View of Hamas

4. (S) Mindef Tantawi said the Egyptian military is "doing our best" and "trying everything" to secure the Philadelphia corridor against smuggling, and it is currently difficult for Hamas to smuggle weapons across the border. The Egyptian military is entering homes in Rafah to search for tunnels. The Minister said that "maybe the sea (route) is different." Perhaps there are ways to conduct smuggling by sea, which is patrolled by the Israeli Navy, or through the "other borders" into Gaza. The GOE is building a three and a half meter high concrete wall on the Gaza border. It is also ready to use U.S.-supplied counter-tunneling equipment. After consulting with generals on his staff, the Minister confirmed that Egypt is ready to sign the LOA authorizing procurement of counter-tunneling equipment. (Note: The LOA was indeed signed later on March 6. End note.)

15. (S) In response to A/S Welch's request that the Mindef meet with Israeli MOD Advisor Amos Gilad during his upcoming visit to Egypt to discuss the Gaza border, the Minister was noncommittal, saying he had met with Gilad "ten days ago." The Minister complained that the Israelis continue to criticize Egyptian efforts on the border, complicating Egyptian aid. "Sometimes FM Livni has hard words about us," he said. He questioned why the American public does not understand that the GOE is committed to fighting terrorism.

16. (S) The Minister told A/S Welch that during the Gazan incursion into North Sinai in January, some Egyptian officers advocated firing on Palestinian civilians crossing the border. The Minister said that such a response would have

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been a political "disaster for us." Hamas would have portrayed the Egyptian military as the enemy. Hamas puts women, children and the handicapped at the front of the line to foment a crisis. A/S Welch praised the Egyptian army's restraint during the crisis and added that he regarded the Egyptian response as successful.

Assistance Waiver and U.S. Visit

17. (C) The Minister thanked A/S Welch for the waiver on U.S. assistance conditionality. Assistant Mindef Major General Al-Assar expressed concern that, as part of the justification in the waiver package, the USG described Egypt's efforts on three issues, including the border, as "modest." He worried that such language would encourage Congress to submit additional amendments in the future.

18. (C) Turning to his upcoming visit to the U.S., now planned for March 24-28, the Minister said he was looking forward to meeting with Secdef Gates, but regretted that he would not be able to meet with members of Congress who will be on Easter recess. After consulting with his staff, the Minister said that he would be interested in meeting with prominent members such as Speaker Pelosi and the Republican leadership.
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